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Some of the controversy concerning the efficacy of psychotherapy or counseling has been resolved by recent evidence that studies reporting no effects had indiscriminately lumped together the high and low therapeutic conditions which are associated with successful and unsuccessful outcomes. The present study extends these findings to a group of essentially neurotic underachieving college freshmen. The 24 experimental subjects (Ss) who received group counseling showed greater improvement in grade point average than 24 matched, no-counseling control Ss. Further, those counseled subjects who received the highest therapeutic conditions tended to show the greatest improvement. (Author)

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Group Counseling with College Underachievers: Comparisons with a Control Group and Relationship to Empathy, Warmth, and Genuineness[1]

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The present study aims at evaluating the effects of time limited group counseling upon the college underachiever by contrasting a matched group of underachieving college students receiving group counseling with a group receiving no counseling, using change in academic performance as the criterion for evaluating outcome. A second aim of the present study is to relate the level of therapist-offered accurate empathy, nonpossessive warmth, and therapist genuineness during group counseling to the degree of improvement in the counseled students.

Eysenck (1952) stirred up considerable controversy by questioning the efficacy of psychotherapy and even quite recently Brayfield (1963) has noted that research indicating positive effects of counseling is largely absent. Recent evidence (Rogers, 1962; Truax, 1963; Truax and Carkhuff, 1964), however, suggest that studies reporting no effects had obtained such negative results by indiscriminately lumping together psychotherapy involving high therapeutic conditions and psychotherapy involving low levels of accurate empathy, nonpossessive warmth, and genuineness on the part of the therapist. The relevance of these high therapeutic conditions for successful psychotherapy and counseling is indicated by considerable theory and research cited elsewhere (Truax and Carkhuff, 1964; Truax and Wargo, 1965).

The present research, then, is an attempt to provide further evidence dealing with the question of the efficacy of psychotherapy and with the effectiveness of three therapeutic conditions of accurate empathy, nonpossessive warmth, and therapist genuineness. The present study extends previous research to a group of underachievers which numerous investigators have described in terms that appear essentially neurotic. These research studies were summarized in Taylor's (1964) excellent review in terms of the following major traits: free-floating anxiety, negative self-value, hostility toward authority, high independence-dependence conflict; negative interpersonal relations, social rather than academic orientation, and unrealistic goal orientation. The underachiever thus represents

a significant social and educational problem, and is a population where the goal of psychotherapy is relatively unambiguous and easily measurable; improvement in grade point average.

Specifically, it was hypothesized that:

1) Underachievers receiving group counseling would show significant improvement in GPA and level of underachievement compared to a matched control group.
2) Within the population of underachievers receiving group counseling, those receiving the highest levels of therapeutic conditions would show the greatest improvement in GPA or level of underachievement.

Procedure

Selection of Underachievers:

Underachieving college freshmen were defined as those who were placed on academic probation at the end of their first semester of course work despite having shown by their scores on the American College Test (ACT) that they had requisite academic aptitude to have made passing grades. A population of 109 students was obtained from the Registrar's office who had a GPA for the one semester of from 1.49 to 2.0 (letter grade of C = 2.0), who had a predicted GPA from the ACT of 2.2 or above, and who were registered for the second freshman semester. From this population, a group of 48 underachievers was obtained in response to a form letter indicating the availability of group counseling. The 48 subjects were then divided randomly into two equal groups of experimentals and controls, with the experimental group further divided into three equal groups of eight subjects each for group counseling, with the following exceptions: 1) all subjects were, of course, not free at each of the three times selected for each of the three counseling groups to meet and 2) equal numbers of males and females were placed in the pool of subjects from which each experimental group was drawn in the expectation that approximately equal numbers of males and females would be assigned to each of the three counseling groups.

The therapy and control groups were well matched as groups, with average ages of 18.0 and 18.1, average predicted GPA of 2.37 and 2.34, average precounseling actual GPA of 1.73 and 1.73, average course loads for the first semester of 15.6 and 15.1 semester hours, and 13.5 and 13.1 semester hours the second semester, respectively.

Treatment Procedure:

The three groups met for group counseling twice each week over a period of 12 weeks, for a total of 24 one-hour sessions. All group sessions were tape recorded and a single therapist was

used who had been trained in the offering of high levels of conditions with an integrated didactic and experiential approach (Truax, Carkhuff and Douds, 1964; Carkhuff and Truax, 1965). Since he had reached a moderately high level of performance in the training provided, it was anticipated that the underachievers receiving group counseling would receive moderately high to high levels of therapeutic conditions.

Measurement of Therapeutic Conditions:

One four-minute excerpt from each tape recorded session was taken at random from the middle one-third of each hour. These samples were coded and rated independently by two raters who had previously been trained in the use of the scales. Measurements were thus obtained using the Accurate Empathy Scale (Truax, 1961), the Unconditional Positive Regard Scale (Truax, 1962), and the Therapist Genuineness Scale (Truax and Dickenson, 1964). The ratings of the three therapeutic conditions present in each group were pooled across raters, scales, and sessions yielding the following mean values:

Group I = 13.2
Group II = 13.4
Group III = 12.6 .

Thus, Group I and Group II had essentially identical levels of conditions while Group III received lower conditions ($t = 1.71$, $p < .06$). Intraclass correlations using Ebel's (1951) formula for reliability of ratings across judges were $r = .83$ for accurate empathy, $r = .75$ for unconditional positive regard, and $r = .25$ for therapist genuineness. In terms of absolute values, Groups I and II received relatively high levels while Group III received moderate levels. The quite low reliability of the therapist genuineness ratings were unexpected but the rank ordering of high and moderate levels was the same for all three measures of therapeutic conditions.

Counseling Outcome Measures:

Five specific measures of improvement in academic performance were used as measures of counseling outcome: 1) a number of underachievers in the counseling and control populations received passing grades during the semester posttherapy; 2) the number of underachievers whose poststatement showed a higher grade point average than they had pretreatment; 3) a grade point average in the underachievers obtained during the semester following treatment; 4) an underachievement score obtained by taking the difference per subject between his predicted grade point average based on the ACT and the obtained GPA during the semester posttherapy; and 5) a change underachievement score obtained by subtracting underachievement score obtained pretreatment from that obtained during the semester posttreatment.

Results

The obtained findings bearing upon the original hypothesis predicting greater improvement for the counseled than the control students, and among the counseled greater improvement for those receiving the highest levels of accurate empathy, nonpossessive warmth, and genuineness, are presented in Table I. As can be seen, the findings tend to support the original hypothesis on all five measures of counseling outcome. The counseled underachievers as a total group tend to show a greater number postcounseling with passing grades, a greater number postcounseling with grades higher than precounseling, a higher average grade point average postcounseling, greater change from pre to post in underachievement scores and less absolute level of underachievement post-therapy in comparison to a matched control population. Further, it can be seen that improvement in academic performance for the counseled underachievers occurs primarily among those who have received relatively high levels of accurate empathy, unconditional positive regard, and genuineness. Thus, those underachievers who received only moderate levels of therapeutic conditions during counseling, tended to show only a slight improvement in academic performance and were essentially equivalent to the matched control population receiving no counseling. In terms of absolute values, the underachievers receiving high therapeutic conditions during group counseling obtained grade point averages posttreatment that were slightly above predicted GPAs based on the ACT, so that as a group it could no longer be classified as underachievers.

Table II presents the results of the analysis and the differences between the counseled and control populations in the further comparisons between the counseled students receiving high conditions, the counseled students receiving moderate levels of therapeutic conditions, and the control population. The findings tend to strongly support the original hypothesis on all five measures of outcome. That is, the underachievers receiving group counseling show greater positive change in academic performance than do students in the matched control group, and, counseled students receiving high conditions show improvement greater than either the control students or those receiving moderate levels of conditions during group counseling. Those receiving only moderate levels of accurate empathy, unconditional positive regard, and counselor genuineness during group counseling did not differ on any of the outcome measures from the control group.

Discussion

At present data offers support for the effectiveness of group counseling in the treatment of underachieving college students.

Students receiving group counseling, as a group, showed significantly greater improvement in academic achievement than did matched underachieving students receiving no group counseling. In fact, the underachievers who received group counseling were, as a group, changed from underachievers to nonunderachievers from pre to postcounseling. By contrast, the underachievers serving as control subjects showed no such change. The significantly greater improvement for the counseled students held whether the analyses were based upon level of underachievement, change in underachievement, GPA postcounseling, number of students with passing grades postcounseling, or number of students showing improvement pre to post GPA.

When the counseled group was divided into those receiving high levels of accurate empathy, nonpossessive warmth and therapist genuineness from their counselor and those receiving only moderate levels of these therapeutic conditions, the findings indicated that positive changes occur almost exclusively within those counseled students who received the highest levels of therapeutic conditions. These findings then, tend to support the original hypothesis and the prior findings suggesting that empathy, warmth and genuineness are of central importance for counseling outcomes. Findings also thus support the theoretical position of Rogers (1962) and indeed the majority of other theorists.

In considering the analyses relevant to the level of therapeutic conditions it should be remembered that the levels of accurate empathy, nonpossessive warmth, and therapist genuineness offered throughout the group counseling experience were relatively high[2] compared to the average level of these conditions offered in a reported sample of experienced therapists working with schizophrenic and neurotic patients (Rogers, 1962; Truax, 1963) or in comparison to a group of fourth year postinternship graduate students in clinical psychology (Bergin and Solomon, 1963).

Further, the present obtained findings that students receiving relatively moderate conditions showed no difference from the control group was not consistent with prior findings (in that the actual conditions were higher than the reported "low conditions" in prior studies reporting deterioration compared to control populations). The implication, of course, is <u>that only therapists and counselors who provide relatively high levels of accurate empathy, warmth, and genuineness are helpful</u>. The average therapist probably has no effect and the below average counselor, a harmful effect.

The findings[3], then, seem consistent with the prior reported research and with the original hypotheses. It should be noted that no attempt was made to evaluate the level of "therapeutic conditions" received by students in the control group from "informal helping relationships". As Bergin has noted (1963),

it seems likely that many students in the control group made use of other informal helping relationships in the absence of the availability of formal counseling.

Finally, it is perhaps of importance to note that 25 percent more of the underachievers receiving group counseling showed passing GPAs after three months of group counseling than did those not receiving group counseling. If this finding should hold in general, then it would have considerable significance for higher education. The implication is that with adequate group counseling of even brief duration that the attrition rate in college could be cut by one-half at relatively low cost and without any lowering of academic standards. If relatively high therapeutic conditions were uniformly provided in group counseling (via better training of counselors or a better selection of counselors), then the attrition rate in colleges could be reduced even more.

Table I

Outcome for Underachievers Receiving Control or Counseling Treatments

	Number of Subjects	Number Post with Passing Grades	Number Post with Higher Grades	Mean GPA Pre	Mean GPA Post	Mean Change Pre to Post in Underachievement Score	Mean Underachievement Score Post
Control Underachievers	24	11 (46%)	11 (46%)	1.73	1.95	+ .22	- .39
Counseled Underachievers	24	17 (71%)	19 (79%)	1.73	2.29	+ .57	- .08
High Conditions	16	13 (81%)	15 (94%)	1.72	2.45	+ .74	+ .04
Moderate Conditions	8	4 (50%)	4 (50%)	1.75	1.92	+ .19	- .37

Table II

Tests of Significance on Outcome Between Control, All Counseling Combined and High and Moderate Levels of Therapeutic Conditions Separately

	X^2 Number Post with Passing Grades	X^2 Number Post with Higher Grades	t Test Mean GPA Post	t Test Mean Change in Under-achievement	t Test Mean Under-achievement
All Counseling vs. Control	4.20 *	7.20 **	1.98 *	2.78 **	1.71 +
High vs. Moderate Conditions	4.26 *	9.13 **	1.71 +	1.90 *	1.40 +
High vs. Control	6.60 *	11.91 ***	2.17 *	4.33 ***	1.96 *
Moderate vs. Control	0.38	0.38	0.10	0.73	0.07

*** $p < .001$
** $p < .01$
* $p < .05$
+ $p < .10$

Footnotes

1
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2
In terms of absolute levels of accurate empathy, the clients receiving high levels of group counseling received an average value on the accurate empathy scale of 4.9, which compared with an average value of 4.7 for low conditions. In prior research on individual counseling successful cases had an average of 5.46 while unsucessful cases had an average value of 4.52. For unconditional positive regard, the present group counseling students received an average value throughout therapy of 4.1 for high conditions, and 3.7 for low conditions. This compares with individual counseling unconditional positive regard values of 3.71 for successful cases and 3.21 for unsuccessful cases.

3
These analyses were computed without eliminating two subjects who dropped out of school and thus out of group counseling within two weeks after the beginning of the second semester so that they actually received fewer than five group counseling sessions. Further, one of the control subjects sought and obtained individual counseling on her own. When these two "treated" and the one "control" are eliminated, the differences are even larger in favor of the predicted positive effects of group counseling over that observed in the controls.

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